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The deep terror plot: a thickening of silence

WASHINGTON — A CIA stratagem to test the veracity of a high-level Communist defector has backfired and is today in part responsible for continuing suggestions that the Soviet KGB plotted the assassination attempt on Pope John Paul three years ago.

There is no evidence to demonstrate a KGB connection to the shooting of the Pope in St. Peter's Square on May 13, 1981. Rather, there is clear evidence that the accused assassin, Mehmet Ali Agca, consorted with several Bulgarian officials just before the shooting. From these facts, speculation has flourished along the following lines:

The Kremlin was worried about the rise of the Solidarity movement in Poland and alarmed at the election of a

Polish Pope. The Bulgarian officials who met Agca must have been members of the Durzhava Sigurnost, the Bulgarian secret police. The Durzhava Sigurnost has close relations with the KGB, and would never have dared to plot an assassination without clearing it with the KGB. Yuri Andropov, the late Soviet President, was head of the KGB. Therefore, Yuri Andropov must have plotted to kill the Pope.



Lars-Erik
Nelson

The Reagan administration relishes this line of speculation on the grounds that it hurts the Kremlin. But of late, Reagan officials have been chagrined to find that they too are being included in the conspiracy theory.

The new line of logic is this: The Bulgarian connection to the KGB is so obvious that the U.S. should be accusing the Kremlin

of plotting the murder attempt. Why isn't it doing so? There must be some kind of U.S. cover-up of the KGB involvement, maybe to avoid worsening relations with Moscow.

A key actor in this drama is a former Czechoslovak major general, Jan Sejna, who defected to the West in March 1968. Sejna was debriefed for a period of several years by the CIA, but in the early 1970s, CIA officials suspected he may have run out of things to say, and was simply telling stories to keep his paycheck coming in.

As a test, he was asked to verify a document that allegedly proved the KGB was the mastermind of virtually all of the world's terrorist groups: the Japanese Red Army, the Baader-Meinhoff gang, the Italian Red Brigades, the Argentine Montoneros. The document looked plausible enough, and Sejna pronounced it authentic. He was thereupon quietly fired. The document was a phony, concocted by the CIA.

Sejna was never told the reason the CIA let him go—and he was never told the document was a phony. On his own, he went off to Western Europe and told a startling tale: He had seen proof that the KGB was the mastermind of all international terror. He gave this information to the French and Italian intelligence services, and some of it wound up in a book by an American author in Rome, Claire Sterling, called "The Terror Network."

When President Reagan came to office in 1981, his secretary of state, Alexander Haig, declared Soviet-sponsored international terrorism to be his No. 1 concern, and demanded that the CIA produce the kind of evidence that Ms. Sterling had cited in her book. The CIA shamefacedly confessed that it was being asked to confirm its own phony document—and Haig had to let the issue drop.

But it has not died. A variety of authors have since specialized in elaborating on Sejna's "evidence"—among them Ms. Sterling, who was been one of the foremost investigators of the plot to kill the Pope. The KGB-Bulgaria-Turkish terrorist connection seems plausible in the light of Sejna's testimony—but Sejna's testimony is false.

WHAT IS THE TRUTH? It is hard to tell at this point. But the best guess of serious analysts is that the Bulgarians were using Ali Agca as an enforcer in a gun-running and drug-smuggling racket—and that he went amok. They doubt that the Bulgarian government plotted to murder the Pope, or that the KGB was involved, or that Ronald Reagan is involved in a cover-up of the KGB to protect U.S.-Soviet relations.

But the administration refuses to comment on any of this—and it only invites further speculation. The irony is that the speculation comes from people who regard themselves as Reagan's friends.